An Analysis of States' Annual Performance Report Data for Indicator 1 (Graduation)

A Report Prepared for the
U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs
by the
National Dropout Prevention Center
for Students with Disabilities

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INDICATOR 1: GRADUATION

INTRODUCTION

The National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities (NDPC-SD) was assigned the task of analyzing and summarizing the data for Indicator 1—Graduation—from the 2005–06 Annual Performance Reports (APRs) and amended State Performance Plans (SPPs), which were submitted by states to OSEP in February of 2007. The text of the indicator is as follows.

> Percent of youth with IEPs graduating from high school
> with a regular diploma compared to percent of all youth in
> the State graduating with a regular diploma.

In the APR, each state reported its graduation rate for special education students, compared its current graduation rate with the state target rate for the 2005-06 school year, discussed reasons for its progress or slippage with respect to the target rate, and described any improvement activities it had undertaken during the year.

In the amended SPP, each state revised its baseline data, measurement of the indicator, targets for improvement, and improvement strategies/activities, as was deemed necessary by the state or by OSEP. A breakdown of the revisions made to the SPPs is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Revisions to the State Performance Plans as submitted in February 2007

Type of revision made	Number of states
Baseline data	14
Measurement of graduation rate	6
Improvement targets	14
Improvement activities	25
None	22

This report summarizes the NDPC-SD's findings for Indicator 1 across the 50 states, commonwealths and territories, and the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), for a total of 60 agencies. For the sake of convenience, in this report the term "states" is inclusive of the 50 states, the commonwealths, and the territories, as well as the BIE.

The evaluation and comparison of graduation rates for the states was confounded by several issues, which will be described in the context of the summary information for the indicator. Given the limited data that is currently available as well as the number of revisions that states made to their baselines, measurement of the indicator, and targets, only very limited generalizations can be made about states' progress on Indicator 1 at this time.

The definition of graduation

The definition of graduation remains inconsistent across states. Some states offer a single "regular" diploma, which represents the only true route to graduation. Other states offer two or more levels of

diplomas or other exiting document, (For example, some states offer a Regular diploma, a High School Certificate, and a Special Education diploma). Some states include General Education Development (GED) candidates as graduates, whereas the majority of states do not. Until a consistent definition of graduation can be established and effected, making meaningful comparisons of graduation rates from state to state will be difficult, at best.

Within-state comparisons—internal consistency

States were instructed that the measurement of graduation rates for special education students should be the same as the measurement for all youth. Additionally, they were directed to explain their calculations. Forty-two states (70%) were internally consistent, using the same method to calculate both their rates. Two states (3%), however, used different methods for calculating the two rates. Sixteen states (27%) did not specify how they calculated one or both of their rates; though all did reiterate the OSEP statement that measurement was the same for both groups.

The states that employed two different calculations cited a lack of comparable data for the two groups of students as having forced the use of different methods. For example, as required under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), states generally calculate average daily membership (total enrollment) per grade in September or October of the year. Special education student counts, however, were usually derived from the 618 data and reflected the number of students between ages 14 – 21 (or 17 – 21 in other states) enrolled in school on December 1st of the year. Several states acknowledged that comparisons of their two rates should not be made.

Types of comparisons made

The graduation indicator requires a comparison of the percent of youth in special education graduating with a regular high school diploma to the percent of all youth in the state graduating with a regular diploma. The majority of states (74%) made the requested comparison. Eight percent of the states compared special-education rates to general-education rates. Thirteen percent made both comparisons. The remaining states (5%) were unable to make comparisons because they lacked either their special education or all-student graduation rate.

Between-state comparisons—calculation methods

Even for states that are internally consistent in calculating graduation rates, comparisons among the states are not easily made because the method of calculation is variable from state to state. The graduation rates included in the APRs were generally calculated using one of two methods: an event rate calculation or a cohort rate calculation. The event rate calculation used by states generally followed the form below.

$$\frac{\textit{\# of graduates receiving a regular diploma}}{\textit{\# of graduates + \# of students receiving GED + \# of dropouts + \# who maxed out in age + \# deceased}}$$

The cohort rate calculation provides a graduation rate for a 4-year cohort of students. This method, as applied in the APRs, generally followed the form below.

$$\frac{\textit{\# graduates receiving a regular diploma}}{\textit{\# graduates receiving a regular diploma + the 4 year cohort of dropouts}}$$

Graduation rates calculated using the event method cannot properly be compared with those derived using the NCES formula. The event rate method tends to over-represent the graduation rate, providing a snapshot of the graduation rate for a particular year that ignores attrition over time, whereas the cohort method provides a more realistic description of the number of students who made it through four years of high school and graduated.

Thirty-four states (57%) used the cohort method for calculating special-education graduation rates. Eighteen states (30%) used the event method and one state (2%) employed a status method. Another seven states (11%) did not specify how this rate was calculated; and the Bureau of Indian Education used the method employed by each state in which one of its schools was located. In the revised SPP, six states (10%) described changes to their methods of calculating graduation rates.

Many states adopted the use of a cohort rate several years ago and were able to report a cohort rate for 2005-06. Other states, however, reported that they were in the process of adopting a cohort-based graduation calculation and would not have their first complete set of cohort data until one or more years from now.

Baseline year

In the guidance for the 2005 SPP, states were directed to provide baseline graduation-rate data for the 2004-05 school year and to set graduation targets for the out years of the Performance Plan based on those data. In the original SPPs, 41 states (68%) complied and provided data from the 2004-05 school year. Seventeen states (28%) reported baseline data from the 2003-04 school year because the 2004-05 data were not available when the SPP was written. One state (2%) reported its baseline data from the 2002-03 school year and one other state (2%) did not provide baseline data at that time.

In the revised SPPs, submitted in February 2007, seven states (11%) reported 2003-04 data; 52 states (87%) reported data from 2004-05; and one state (2%) reported baseline data from the 2005-06 school year.

GRADUATION RATES

Across the 60 states, the highest reported graduation rate for special education students was 93.9% and the lowest was 13.6%.

Figure 1 shows the special education graduation rates for all of the states. Note that states are grouped by the method used to calculate their graduation rate. Additionally, the states for which a rate is not shown did not have data available for the 2005-06 school year at the time of this report.
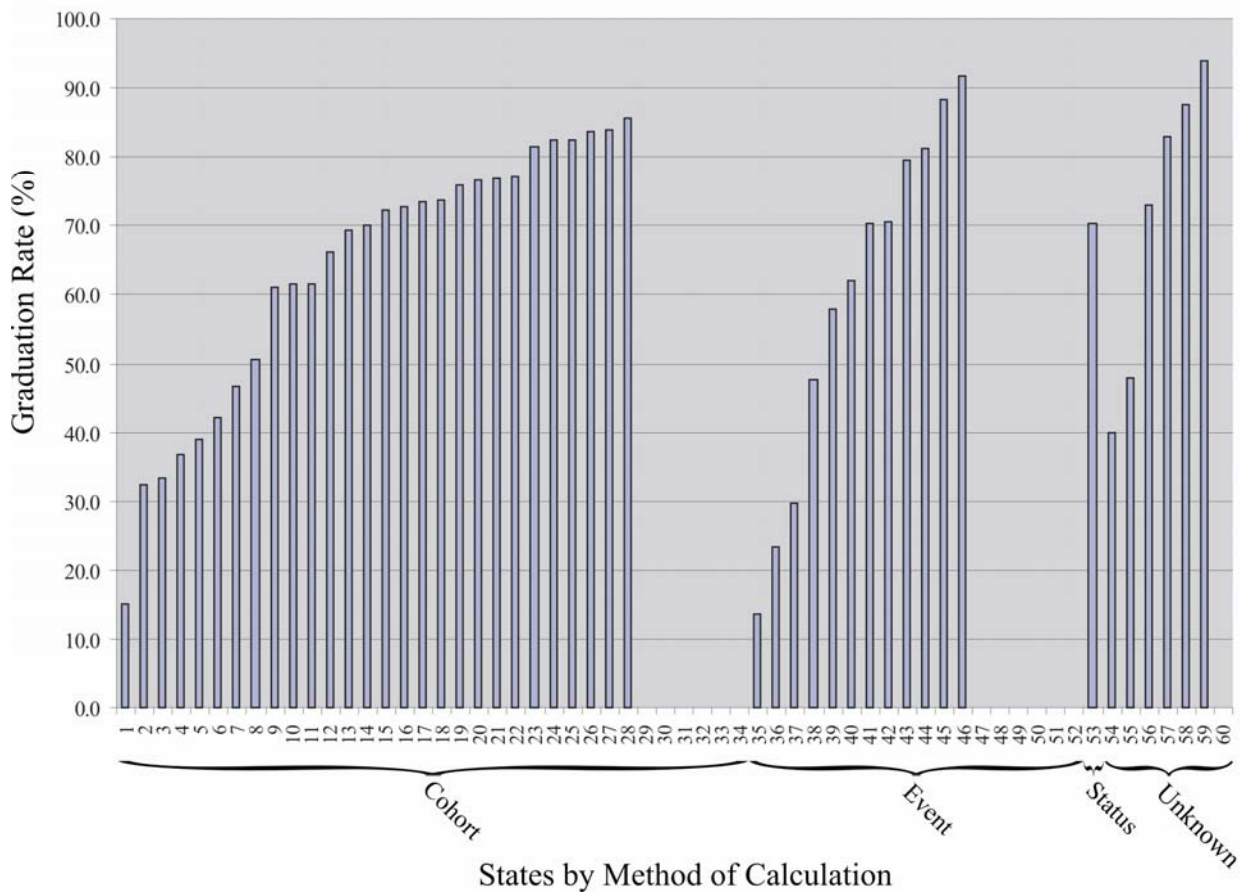
2005-06 Special Education Graduation Rates

Figure 1

Figures 2, 3 and 4 show states' graduation rates, sorted by method of calculation, for both special education and all students. Again, note that some states have missing data and hence are displayed as gaps in the chart.
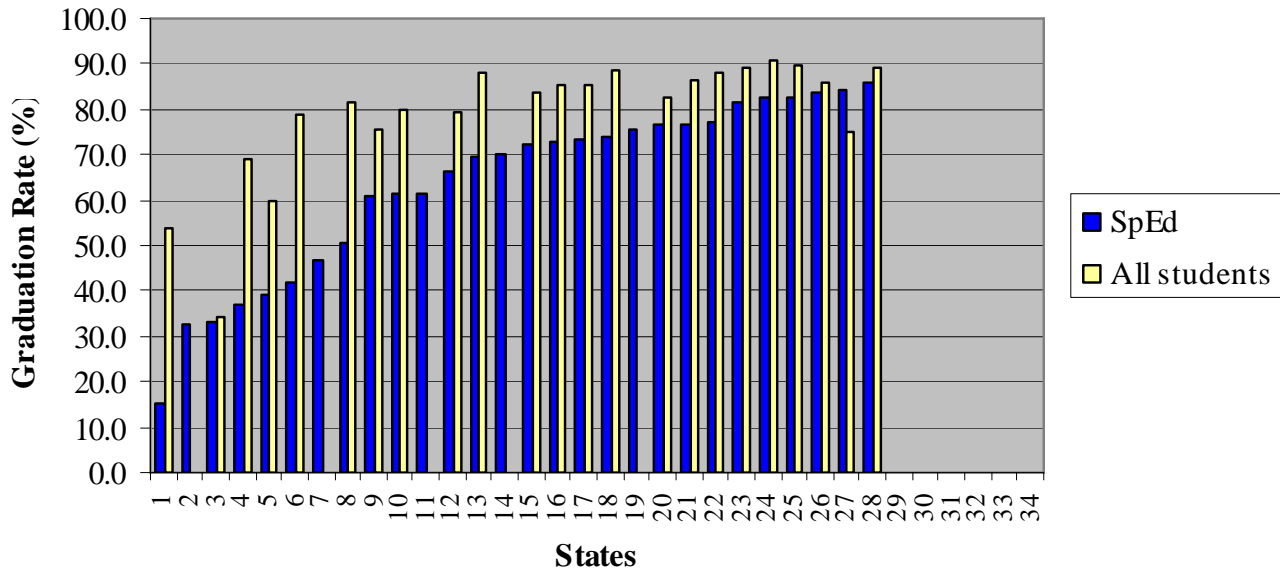
2005-06 Graduation Rates
(Cohort Method)

Figure 2

2005-06 Graduation Rates
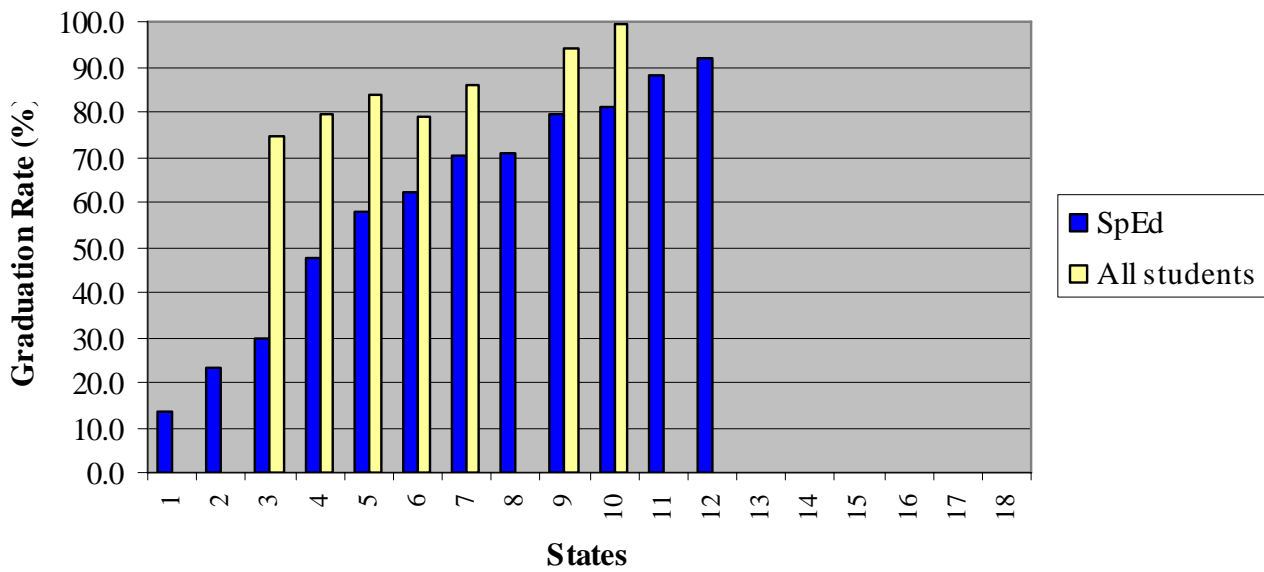## (Event Method)

Figure 3

2005-06 Graduation Rates
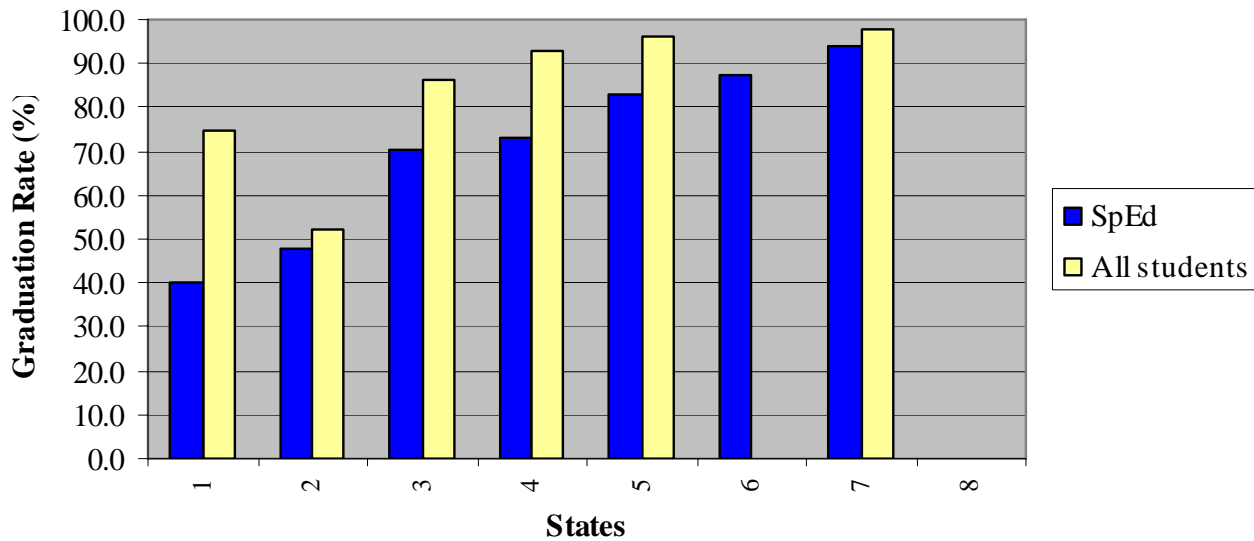## (Unknown Method)

Figure 4

GRADUATION GAP

States were instructed to identify and address any gap that exists between the all-student graduation rate and the rate for special education students. To calculate that gap, the special education rate is subtracted from the all-student rate. If a gap exists and has a positive value, this indicates that the all-student graduation rate is higher than the rate for special education students. This was the case in 35 states (58%). Conversely, a negative value for a gap indicates that special education students graduate at a higher rate than the entire population of students in the state. Based on the data in these APRs, this was the case in only one state (2%). The remaining 24 states (40%) did not report one of the two graduation rates needed to calculate the gap value. Consequently, no gap values were calculated for those states.

Figure 2 shows the graduation-rate gaps for the states. The order of states on the graph is based on each state's gap score. Note State #1 has a negative gap, which indicates a higher graduation rate for special education students than for all students. The rest of the states' gaps, where they could be calculated, are positive values. The states at the right end of the chart are those for which data were missing.

2005-06 Graduation Rate Gaps
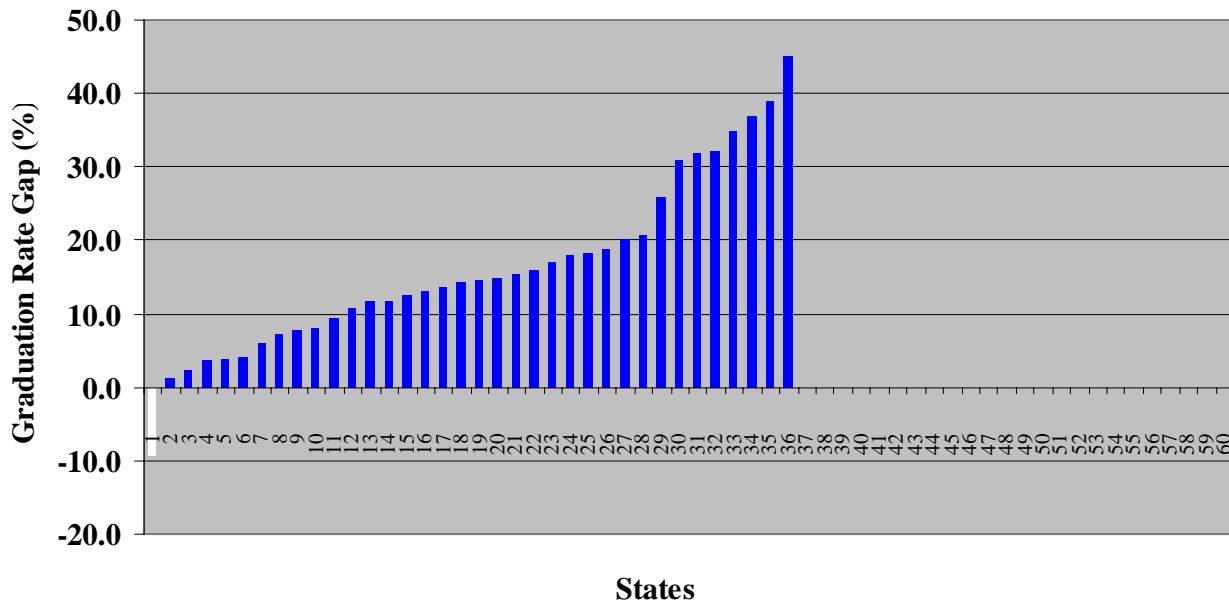### (All-student Graduation Rate – SpEd Graduation Rate)

Figure 5

GRADUATION RATE TARGETS

Twenty-two states (37%) achieved their targeted graduation rate for students with disabilities and 31 states (52%) did not. The remaining 16 states (11%) were missing special education data and could not determine progress made to achieve their targeted graduation rates.

Most states described their graduation targets in terms of a graduation rate that they plan to achieve during each year of the SPP. Of the 60 states, 46 (77%) specified their targets in this manner. For these states, the median targeted gain was 6.0% and the average targeted gain was 9.4%. The remaining states described their targets in a variety of ways that can be categorized as 1) improving over the previous year by x%, 2) decreasing the graduation gap by x% per year, 3) improving the graduation rate within a certain range each year, or 4) moving a specified number or percentage of districts to a particular graduation rate.

While OSEP instructed states to set measurable and rigorous targets for their special-education graduation rates, the term 'rigorous' is not defined and the majority of states have set modest targets. The targeted improvement in graduation rates by the 2010-11 school year, as described in these APR submissions, ranged between 0% and 30%, with the largest number proposing improvements of between 0 and 5% by 2011. Table 2 shows a breakdown of these proposed improvements.

Table 2

Proposed amounts of improvement in special education graduation rates

by the end of the 2010-11 school year

Range of improvement	Number of states
0% - 5.0%	21
5.1% - 10.0%	10
10.1% - 15.0%	8
15.1% - 20.0%	1
20.1% - 25.0%	4
>25%	2
Unable to calculate because of method of specifying targets	14

CONNECTIONS AMONG INDICATORS

Twenty-nine states (48%) identified a strong connection between Indicators 1 and 2, saying that the two indicators are so tightly intertwined that combining the efforts made sense. This is an increase from the 2005 SPP reports, which listed only 13 states using common activities for Indicators 1 and 2. Several states additionally described a connection among Indicators 1, 2, 3, 13, and 14 and coordinated some of their activities accordingly.

NDPC-SD INTERACTIONS WITH STATES

Fifteen states (25%) indicated that they had either used materials from NDPC-SD, received some form of technical assistance from NDPC-SD, or planned to request assistance from the Center in the future. During the year, NDPC-SD had some form of interaction with all 60 states. Table 3 shows a breakdown of these interactions using the categories specified in the OSEP template for this report.

Table 3

NDPC-SD Interactions with States during the 2005-06 school year

Nature of interaction	Number of states
A. *Information* – NDPC-SD provided information by mail, telephone, teleseminar, listserv, or Communities of Practice to State	60
B. *Conference* – State attended a conference sponsored by NDPC-SD	21
C. *Regional or State Group Assistance* – NDPC-SD provided small group assistance to the State	48
D. *Consultation* – NDPC-SD provided on-going consultation in the State	8

IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

States were instructed to report the strategies, activities, timelines, and resources they plan to employ in order to improve the special education graduation rate over the years of the SPP. The range of proposed activities was considerable. Forty-one states (68%) listed one or more evidence-based improvement activities in their APR, while the remaining 19 states (32%) did not propose any evidence-based improvement activities. There is still a dearth of evidence-based programs in the area of school completion that have demonstrated efficacy specifically for students with disabilities.

Using the 10 categories provided by OSEP, NDPC-SD coded each state's improvement activities. Center staff then calculated the percentage of effort directed toward each of these categories. Figure 6 shows the overall distribution of activities, by category, across all states. A list of the categories and subcategories appears in Appendix 1-A with examples of each.

Figure 6 shows that data and monitoring activities (A & B) as well as professional development (C) and technical assistance (D) activities were relatively abundant, each accounting for between 12 and 14% of all state activities. Policy (E) and program evaluation (H) activities were much less common (at 5% and 6%, respectively), as was states' increasing the number of FTEs at the state level (I), which accounted for only 2% of all activities. Many states described one or more improvement activities that were unique to their specific needs and programs (J). These activities constitute 14% of the total states' activities.
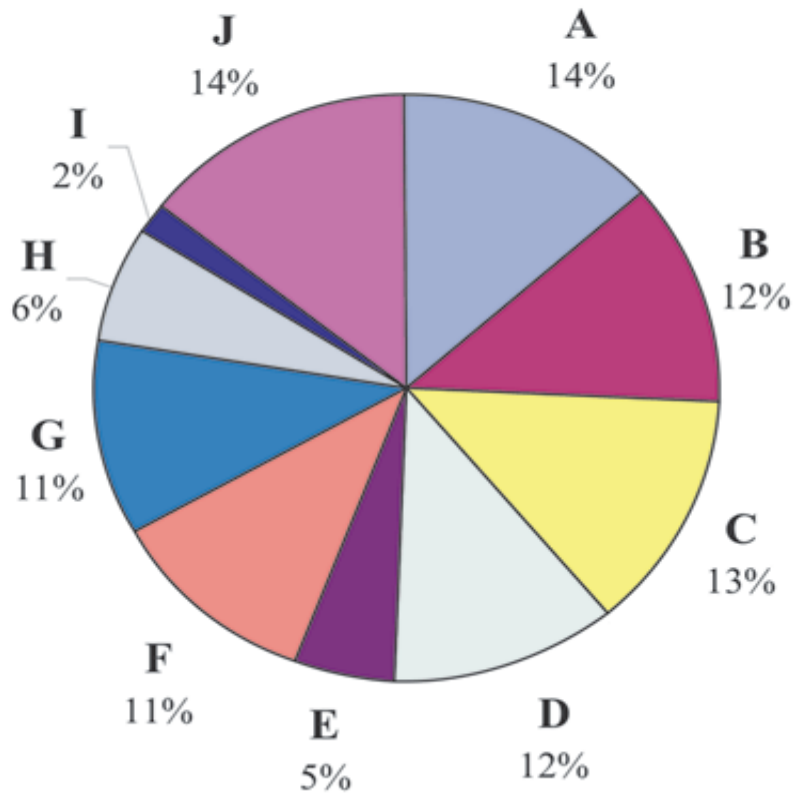
2005-06 Improvement Activities
for Indicator 1

J
14%

A
14%

I
2%

H
6%

B
12%

G
11%

C
13%

F
11%

E
5%

D
12%

Figure 6

Legend

A) Improve data collection/reporting or systems
B) Improve systems administration and monitoring
C) Provide training/professional development
D) Provide technical assistance
E) Clarify/examine/develop policies and procedures
F) Program development
G) Collaboration/coordination
H) Evaluation
I) Increase/Adjust FTE
J) Other

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many of the recommendations made in NDPC-SD's reports on the 2005 SPPs still hold true for the current APR submissions. Additionally, several additional recommendations have arisen while working with the current submissions. The recommendations are listed below.

- There needs to be a better correspondence between what states report in the APR and what is actually being done in terms of improvement activities as well as the calculation of actual graduation rates and the meeting of improvement targets.

- Instruct states to number their improvement activities clearly, rather than embedding numerous activities in long sections of text.

- States should, as much as possible, obtain their all-student and special education data using comparable methods at comparable times of the year. This may be difficult, as the December 1 Child Count generally serves as the source for the special-education data and states' total enrollment is usually collected earlier in the fall.

- Many states are moving toward the use of a cohort-based calculation method, though not all states are there yet. This move, toward what most feel is a more accurate method, should yield a fairly realistic picture of graduation rates.

- In the next round of APRs, it would be helpful to have states report the exact calculation(s) used in arriving at their graduation rates as well as the exact source of the data used in both the all-student and special-education rate calculations.

APPENDIX 1-A – OSEP IMPROVEMENT ACTIVITY CATEGORIES

A) *Improve data collection / reporting or systems – improve the accuracy of data collection and school district/service agency accountability via technical assistance, public reporting/dissemination, or collaboration across other data reporting systems. Developing or connecting data systems.*

- The Office of Special Education Services met with the Office of Accreditation, the Student Information System, and the Data Services section to discuss differences in the reporting of graduates for special education and regular education students. Although it seems that these differences are based on definitions of graduates provided by federal (special education) and state (regular education) laws – so they cannot be modified for consistency – the sections discussed ideas to make the differences in reporting more understandable to the public.

- State has expanded the ISD and LEA level data reports to include data from the Single Record Student Data system. This additional information allows districts to disaggregate data around the complex issues related to student performance and graduation rates for the purpose of developing system improvement plans.

- Design protocol for data analysis at district level to evaluate students' access to general education curriculum in regular education environments. Protocol will include inquiry regarding: IEP justifications for removal from regular education environments; IEP components establishing foundation for access to general education curriculum, e.g., present levels of performance, goals/objectives, special education services, supplementary aids and services; Extent to which accommodations for participation in general education curriculum are individually determined and precise; Extent to which general education teachers are aware of and fulfill IEP implementation responsibilities; Extent to which general and regular education teachers use methods for collaboration that maximize students' access to general education curriculum; Any disproportionality in placement of race/ethnic groups in less inclusive settings; and Teacher competency in core academic subjects.

- Provide districts with longitudinal baseline data for future program improvement activities.

- Align Special Education Program data collection to track information consistent with the one used by Academic Affairs for NCLB.

- Grade level fields were added to the Special Education Student Information System (SESIS). This will allow a more appropriate comparison between special education students and all students (the measurement is consistent for figuring graduation and dropout rates).

B) *Improve systems administration and monitoring – refine/revise monitoring systems, including continuous improvement and focused monitoring. Improve systems administration.*

- Monitor IEP students by organizing counselors, resource specialist, and teacher to interpret data and react to the pattern of data to develop ways to encourage and reward student participation in school.

- Monitor LSS to evaluate the effectiveness of the activities in increasing the number of students who complete their educational programs.

- Graduation data were analyzed with the following key stakeholders: Special Education Advisory Panel, SEA Staff, and the State Behavioral Alliance. Discussions focused on AEA level trend data. Positive discussions centered on the decrease in the graduation gap in one AEA. The bulk of the discussion focused on the increase in graduation gap across the remaining ten AEAs. Further, although two AEAs met the state's target, both of these AEAs increased the graduation gap.

- In June 2006, state data was used to verify whether students had exited from special education with a "Graduation" status, whether they were within the appropriate age range, and/or whether they had reentered the system.

C) *Provide training/professional development – provide training/professional development to State, LEA and/or service agency staff, families and/or other stakeholders.*

- Provide training to schools to increase consistency in their methods of reporting graduation and dropout rates.

- The State has provided monthly guidance in the form of conference calls to ISD directors and other key stakeholders on key priorities related to new graduation requirements. The State has also hosted more than ten (10) day-long workshops and work sessions around the graduation requirements to a variety of stakeholder groups.

- Professional development has been provided statewide in collaboration with Title I, Reading First and the state reading coordinator. This has been accomplished through a variety of delivery formats including face-to-face, webinars, online training modules and the development of an on line learning community. The content of the training and information was developed to target areas identified by the SDE and school districts for improvement. This year, the State has focused on the highest need areas of middle school math, reading curriculum leadership, vocabulary development and Response to Intervention.

- Support to school personnel on implementation of RTI at the secondary level and implementation of co-teaching models being adopted by all districts.

D) *Provide technical assistance – provide technical assistance to LEAs and/or service agencies, families and/or other stakeholders on effective practices and model programs.*

- The Department of Education (DOE) provided self-determination training for students with disabilities at the Annual Transition Conference, held on March 8-9, 2005. Parents, teachers, and students with disabilities participated in the training.

- Governor's Youth Leadership Forum – Governor's Youth Leadership Forum is an innovative, intensive, five-day career leadership training program for high school juniors and seniors with disabilities. Program activities focus on career planning, leadership development, technology resources, and information on disability history to assist young people with disabilities in reaching their maximum potential.

- Region 4 Education Service Center (ESC) provides statewide leadership for the State Behavior Support Initiative. Region 4 ESC works in conjunction with a 20-region network to ensure dissemination of information and training statewide. Training modules assist campus teams in developing and implementing a wide range of behavior strategies and prevention-based interventions. These skills have helped educators establish systems of support at school-wide, classroom, and individual student levels.

- Continue to host a statewide conference on promising practices in education programs and services for children and youth who receive educational services in non-traditional education programs (including non-public, charters, and education programs associated with treatment programs).

- The SEA engaged in developing an extensive document detailing research-based interventions and policies that effect graduation and dropout. To this end, the SEA supported a statewide dropout advisory group to conduct an analysis of policies, procedures and practices in the areas of graduation and dropout prevention. A result of this work was a series of online supports to identify successful interventions used within schools of similar characteristics.

- Continue after school mentoring program and encourage students with disabilities to take advantage of the program.

E) ***Clarify/examine/develop policies and procedures – clarify, examine, and or develop policies or procedures related to the indicator.***

- Develop a companion document to the State High School Diploma and the Certificate of Program Completion. The Exit Document meets the IDEA 2004 summary statement requirement. The Exit Document provides useful information on the student's course of study and academic success as well as assistance the students may need as they move toward their post-school goals.

- Review LSS policies and procedures for practices that assure the provision of services, supports, aids accommodations, and interventions assure access to and participation in general curriculum and assessments, and promote high school graduation with a regular high school diploma.

- The State Board of Education proposed rule changes were approved that address students with disabilities ability to demonstrate skills and complete graduation requirements. One significant change is regarding the requirement for students to reach a 'proficient level' on the 10th grade statewide assessment. Students with IEPs now have three options available to them for proficiency demonstration; 1) use the statewide assessment, 2) use a locally design

alternate process available to all students in the district and 3) the IEP team can design the method that the student will use to demonstrate proficiency. This change allows students to use a variety of methods that are appropriate for them to demonstrate proficiency and to meet this state graduation requirement.

- A new state regulation has been put in place that allows students to come back to school (until legal school age) if they get a certificate of attendance, or complete the required coursework but have not received a diploma.

- State minimum dropout age was raised to age 18; School Flex and Fast Track were implemented; Early Warning Signs/School Report Card were implemented.

F) *Program development – develop/fund new regional/statewide initiatives.*

- Project FOCUS Academy, a pilot distance-learning program with courses for educators in Universal Design for Learning, Transition/Post-School Outcomes, and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, which supports participants in making school-wide changes that benefit students with disabilities.

- As a part of the High School Redesign efforts the SDE developed an application for and received a grant from the National Governors Association to bring together state leaders for the purpose of developing a plan to improve Adolescent Literacy. The needs of students with disabilities are a priority of the plan and we are continuing to work to ensure that students with the most significant challenges to reading are addressed and supported.

- Performance Learning Centers were designed for at-risk students. They use an on-line, self-paced curriculum and encourage hands-on projects and activities. These centers are open to students with disabilities.

- DOE Strategic Plan Initiative to support dropout prevention efforts.

G) *Collaboration/coordination – Collaborate/coordinate with families/agencies/initiatives.*

- Collaborate with the National Dropout Prevention Center for Students with Disabilities to identify effective strategies/interventions to support school completion.

- SDE staff participated in the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) conference and conceptualized state strategies to address improving graduation rates for students of diverse learning needs. State has deployed components of this conceptual model in a year-long initiative "Reach and Teach for Learning" within which 17 building teams are closing the achievement gap and improving graduation rates for at-risk learners.

- SDE and Vocational Rehabilitation are partnering to develop a state Youth Leadership Network. The primary purpose of this council will be to provide opportunities for transition age youth with disabilities to develop leadership skills, and to promote membership in other youth organizations. An additional purpose is to provide input on disability related issues, especially related to the transition from school to work and adult living.

- Stakeholders in both general and special education are continuing the dialogue necessary to establish the framework for addressing the needs of all struggling students. The crossover between general education and special education implicit in RTI and the related activities described above will require a blending or "braiding" of programs and issues in order to maximize resources and avoid duplication of efforts. Braided Services describes the blending of several concepts that are a part of the reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA '04) and that have a considerable degree of overlap, in particular, the involvement of both special and general education.

- Collaborate with the Divisions of Career Technology and Adult Learning and Student, Family, and School Support in the development of a career awareness instructional framework to be infused into the Voluntary State Curriculum.

H) *Evaluation – conduct internal/external evaluation of improvement processes and outcomes.*

- Review the trend data of all districts and schools to determine whether dropout prevention activities are working.

- Request that each school and LEA complete a self-assessment of its district and school dropout prevention programs.

- Use evaluation data from school- and district-planning efforts to develop future activities.

I) *Increase/Adjust FTE – Add or re-assign FTE at State level. Assist with the recruitment and retention of LEA and service agency staff.*

- New High School Re-Design Coordinator position created.

- State is in the process of hiring more teachers for the high school to assist in general classes.

- Hire more special education teachers in the high school to assist students in the general classes.

- Reassignment of Department of Education, Office of Special Populations personnel to align with districts in need of intervention. Assign appropriate personnel to Progressive Support and Intervention Teams targeting LEAs with high schools "in need of intervention."

- Increase in the number of human resources available at the high school level.

J) *Other – TA Center should indicate any additional types of improvement activities specific to their topic/area.*

- Develop a best practices manual on effective practices/strategies based on schools that have made progress in improving graduation rates.

- Preparing for Life Manual is available on the State Department of Education Web site for parents, students, and LEAs. The document can be used for training and awareness on diploma and exit option requirements and other transition topics.

- State will examine transition-related activities and align them with the National Standards and Indicators for Secondary Education and Transition for program effectiveness. State will disseminate Standards after completion to interagency partners, Special Education Cooperative Transition consultants, Directors of Special Education, SDE staff, and institutions of higher education.

- Apply for the next cycle of State Personnel Development Grants (SPDG), focused on implementing a statewide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) initiative.

- Assist school districts to identify opportunities for expanding community-based placement options, particularly for early childhood special education programs.

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